# Notes on Exhibition Practice and Material Folk Culture in the Museum

*Pravina Shukla*

## Prelude

Prepared for presentation at the National Endowment for the Humanities "Forum on Folklore and the Humanities" in Washington, D.C., October 2000, this paper will address three major areas of concern. First, it will look briefly at some of the ways in which folk art has been treated in museums. Second, it will focus on some current trends in exhibition practice in museums throughout the United States. And finally, the paper will consider some possible directions for the future of folk art in museum exhibitions. As scholars and practitioners, our collective goal should be to bring the ideas, the theoretical and intellectual perspectives of folklore, out of the textbook and into the museum, whether the museum be dedicated to natural history, anthropology, history, folk art, or even fine art.

## Introduction

When exhibited, so-called "folk art" is often regarded as the art of the common man (literally " man," as displays are frequently gender-biased). Other implicit and explicit assumptions are that the art is anonymous and untutored (with a complete disregard for folk ateliers and rigorous systems of learning and teaching the traditional arts). Most importantly, many exhibitions imply that the "folk art" on display represents the entire community rather than one individual within a broader communal context.

To understand the treatment of folk art in museums it is useful to consider both an early famous exhibition and one of the latest permanent exhibits to feature traditional art. This comparison provides a perspective on the breadth of folk art on display in American museums over the last seventy years. One of the earliest blockbuster

exhibitions was "American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America," which opened in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (see Cahill 1932). An ambitious recent creation is "Shaping Traditions: Folk Arts in a Changing South," a permanent exhibition at the Atlanta History Center that opened in 2000 and focuses on southern folk art (see Burrison 2000). By using these two exhibitions as bookends for our analysis of museum practice, we discover some common trends. Both "folk" displays focus on bringing the past into the present. In both cases objects are represented as community-based art that serves an entire group. And both employ a common paradigm, namely, that the exhibited objects are useful yet beautiful (even though not all utilitarian objects are actually put to use and many serve a purely aesthetic function).

Exhibition trends have surely improved in the last seventy years, as the Atlanta History Center exhibition and its accompanying catalogue show. In Atlanta, there is an explicit effort to display objects with the names and photos of their makers, therefore eliminating, visually and in the label copy, the notion of anonymous objects. But although exhibitions of folk art today do highlight individuals, most exhibitions still present the artist as rooted in her or his community and not as an individual of strong personality, innovative and rich in personal aesthetics, the way artists are regarded in museums of fine art.

Broadening this discussion in an attempt to understand current trends as influenced by historical practices of exhibition, we should look at current thinking about art, folk art, and display, both by scholars and museum practitioners. There is still much preoccupation with definitions of "folk art" versus "fine art"; the dichotomy is often presented as a problem in the exhibition label copy and expressly addressed as something to be resolved by the exhibition. Ethnographic objects are shown primarily in their function as cultural objects; for example, a carved spoon is contextualized as an item of kitchen use, a utensil. Consequently, aesthetic regard for the object is of secondary importance. What matters most is the function of the object in the daily life of its user. Unintentionally, this presumption tends to lower the aesthetic standards of museum presentations, causing a glaring dichotomy between art museum exhibitions—where objects are chosen for their beauty and aesthetic excellence—and exhibitions in ethnographic museums, where culturally meaningful objects may or

may not embody the aesthetic excellence of the culture that they are meant to represent. Since many people assume that they will see pretty things upon entering a museum, this difference in aesthetic standards reinforces the preconception that "our" artists and cultures have refined aesthetic senses and that "other" peoples—those of rural or non-Western background who often become the subjects of ethnography—are primarily concerned with utilitarian objects that serve rudimentary functions, with little regard for the higher, finer things of life.

Native objects, those representing exotic, indigenous cultures, are shown in United States museum exhibitions through prevalent conventions of display and interpreted in particular ways of understanding art and the world. This, then, raises a question: whose culture do these displays represent? That of the people who make and use the objects on exhibit, or that of the people who display these same objects in their museums? The assumptions of both museum professionals and museum visitors influence the messages the objects convey, reflecting perhaps the exhibitor and beholder more than the maker and user. This important but subtle pitfall is one we should remember every time we create or enter a museum exhibit.

There are precautions we could take to avoid some of the common traps of exhibiting traditional art in museum spaces. Our professional and collective goal should be to change the way in which we, as folklorists, regard and hence display objects and the people who make and use them, as well as the ways in which culture and art are interpreted, contextualized, and used educationally for the museum visitor.

## The Objects on Display

Objects in a museum display should be represented as both art and as ethnographic specimens, as individual creations and as general cultural property, and not conventionally classed as either "folk art" or "fine art." These categorizations create a dichotomy between use and beauty, while, in fact, the people who make and use objects of ethnography often regard them as simultaneously instrumental and aesthetic. Furthermore, an object may have multiple meanings based in different contexts. Therefore, objects should be analyzed in regard to the roles they play in the daily lives of the people, as well as in the context of special occasions, in order to suggest more accurately how

the object is regarded in *many* contexts. Besides explaining the object in terms of active use in socially charged situations, museum exhibitions should also show how an object isolated from a meaningful ritualistic context, for example, can still provide aesthetic pleasure for its owner and its viewers while held in storage. Culturally meaningful objects, appreciated for their form and beauty, provide aesthetic pleasure for their makers in the atelier; for the worshippers in the temple; for the visitor in someone's house. Beautiful objects on display in a home or temple may impress the deity with the beauty of the form; impress a prospective groom's family with the wealth of the household; impress household members with the owner's decorative talent and sense of beauty; or, most importantly, reinforce the maker or owner's sense of worth and self-esteem. An excellent example of this kind of contextualization in a museum display is the current University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's exhibition "Pomo Indian Basket Weavers: Their Baskets and the Art Market" (see Berman 1998). It presents the baskets as both beautiful and functional and depicts social, ethnic, gender, and economic dynamics. In addition, the exhibition addresses power struggles among the Pomo Indians and the non-Indian buyers, collectors, and even museum personnel who come in contact with the beautiful woven baskets.

A dynamic display should broaden the viewer's understanding of the cultural functions and multiple contexts of an object, and it should broaden physical perceptions of the object as well. This can be achieved by providing multiple views of the object, a goal easily accomplished by allowing the museum visitor to walk around the object and view it from different angles. Views from underneath and above the object can be effected through well-positioned mirrors. Ideal museum exhibitions should also provide multiple examples of a kind of object, showing a typological range of similar items. For example, a bountiful display of duck decoys at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland, shows the vast variety and aesthetic range of the region's carved and painted duck decoys. This elegant exhibition practice not only allows the museum visitor to gain an aesthetic appreciation of the spectrum of visual examples, but more importantly, this exercise also lets each object become a single entity in a broader

group, relieving it of the burden of representing, in isolation, its kind or its culture. For instance, simply by demonstrating that Pomo Indians developed an enormous range of baskets that vary in size, shape, form, materials, function, and aesthetic excellence, the Philadelphia exhibit communicates much to a museum viewer who may have erroneously assumed that some societies are characterized by simple homogeneous assemblages of utilitarian objects.

An ideal display, then, would allow objects to serve multiple functions in multiple contexts and permit visitors to view objects from multiple perspectives; it should also provide the object with multiple cultural interpretations. This can be achieved by having several labels that view objects through the disciplinary lenses of folklore, anthropology, art history, or history. These labels should carry an author attribution, as many currently do, in an attempt to show how the perspectives on an object depend on its interpreter. A curator, whether an art historian or a folklorist, will naturally have a different perspective than the native creator whose tribal art is on display. All views are valid and useful to understand the changing meanings associated with objects as they travel from deep cultural contexts to their current contexts of museum exhibition.

Multiple voices and labels can and should incorporate multimedia, such as audio, video, and increasingly, computer or internet applications. An excellent example of these technologies in practice can be seen in a permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. In "All Roads Are Good," Native Americans belonging to the tribes represented in the Museum's collections were invited to select and display objects meaningful to them, explaining their choices in video and audio segments accompanying the artifacts. The individual tribal displays have been organized in a broader context of the Museum's collection, and therefore the voice and authority of the curators and museum director are also felt and presented alongside native conceptions of the chosen materials on display.

Following recent trends in scholarship, museum exhibitions should also make explicit the biography of the object. Exhibitions can incorporate some of the scholarly discourse on the social lives of things, the current conception of objects as being things in motion that cross

national and transnational borders on their voyage from the scene of original cultural use to the art market. This approach could be greatly enhanced by acknowledging the final incarnation of the object in a museum setting. For example, in their final venue at the American Museum of Cultural History in New York City, the vodou altars in the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History's exhibition "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" (see Cosentino 1995) accumulated $1,400.00 in coins left for the deities or *lwas.* The money gathered in offerings attests to the fact that these altar objects, originally from Port-au-Prince in Haiti, have retained spiritual connotations for practitioners of *vodou* in the United States. The final destination of these altar objects, in a sterile, artificial museum gallery in Manhattan, is as meaningful and worthy of study as was their earlier location in the back room of a crowded and noisy vodou temple in Port-au-Prince.

## The People Who Make, Use, Buy, and Sell Art

Besides improving the way in which objects are viewed and contextualized in museum exhibitions, we should also advance the way in which human beings are represented in this public arena of display. The dynamic relationship between people and their objects could be made explicit by showing the different levels of interaction one might have with an object—for example, as an artist or maker, as a seller, buyer, user, consumer, or beholder.

There are many ways in which people can be incorporated into an exhibition. One is to include peoples' voices: written as quotes in label copy, captured as audio components, recorded along with their images as video elements of an exhibit. A pertinent example of this practice can be found in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History's recently opened permanent hall of African art and culture entitled "African Voices." True to the exhibit's title, the voices of those who reside in the continent of Africa or who comprise the large African Diaspora are prominently heard, accented and multifaceted, in the introductory video montage, in the African radio broadcasts, in the label copy of individual artistic creations. The visitor to this exhibition experiences the range and excellence of the art of people of African descent through the voices of both the people who make the art and those for whom the art is made.

The attempt to incorporate the creator's perspective is usually managed by bringing in the "native" voice during the stages of exhibition planning. Often, representatives of the culture in which a piece originated are brought in as consultants, helping to fill in the structure of an exhibition that has already developed. A true incorporation of the native voice is achieved, however, not by using native consultants and informants, but rather by utilizing these same people as collaborators. An ideal model would include a collaboration, an early consultation, beginning in the field during data and object collection, continuing through the process of the conceptualization of a show, through the stages of curation, and ending with exhibit education. This kind of collaboration needs to begin early on, in the field, rather than being initiated in the curatorial offices of the museum building as an attempt to rectify possible mistakes in galleries that are nearly complete.

Along with voice, a museum exhibition should also integrate the bodies, both metaphoric and literal, of the people whose art is on display. The metaphoric body is welcomed through the objects on display, many of which exemplify and embody their makers and users. This point, often implicit, can be made explicit in an attempt to show the close relationship between object and maker and also to humanize and personalize otherwise inanimate things. Another metaphoric way to include the body of the makers and users is through photography, through pictures both large and small. Many of the permanent halls of Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, including the "Africa: One Continent, Many Worlds" exhibition, effectively use life-size photo cutouts of local people who act as guides on the journey into the heart of many African nations.

There are many ways to add the literal body, the actual person, to the exhibition. Two are most effective: public programming and live demonstrations. Public programming allows many arts to be related and expressed in a stage-like area, contextualizing the art on display within a larger whole and giving local people an opportunity to speak and perform. Another method is to incorporate live artists who create their work within the exhibition, not divorced from the gallery, but inside it, near other examples of similar art. An obvious application of these techniques occurs in the Smithsonian Institution's annual Folklife Festival, which gives people an arena in which to express

themselves, to demonstrate cultural continuity and innovation, and to create and communicate in the actual present, released from the quintessential ethnographic present.

The goal to include a variety of voices and perspectives need not become too complicated; it need not require a wide search for informants from far-off lands. Many potential contributors already patronize exhibitions of ethnic arts; most exhibitions, of course, attract members of local diasporic communities. These underutilized sources of information and cultural authority could enrich not only exhibitions, but also most of the educational and public programming that accompanies the actual display of objects. For example (with the "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" exhibition serving us again), we see how reactions to the same exhibition differ by extent of cultural familiarity. During the opening wine and cheese reception that enabled a preview of the exhibition in both Los Angeles and New York, a Haitian band was hired to perform. A guest in one venue and a band member in the other became possessed in response to the calling of the drums, instruments used to invite the spirits to descend and ride the bodies of those willing to become inhabited. As with the previous anecdote of the money left for the Haitian gods, this example demonstrates how differently the museum display (as recreated altars) and even the opening party can function for communities of outsiders and insiders. A museum is not necessarily a secular place of ethnic art on display; it could very well be a spiritual place of worship, where cigarettes and money can be deposited on altars, where the *vodou* spirits can dance through the bodies of local Haitians.

Thus, an incorporation of the people of the local ethnic community can greatly enhance any presentation of arts identified as culture-specific. But it is of equal importance to involve the literal bodies of others who view the show, in an attempt to learn how the objects and cultures on display are understood by those unfamiliar with them. One of the ways in which all museum visitors could benefit from previous visitors' experiences would be to provide an opportunity for people to leave their literal mark in the show. People's written comments can be pinned on comment boards; their facial expressions and body language can be recorded in a Polaroid photo booth or video station. Or quite simply, as was done in "The Time of Our Lives," an

exhibition at New York City's New Museum of Contemporary Art, comments can be entered on an internet site, later to appear printed on label copy alongside the art on display.

Exhibitions are curated by a team of experts who spend months thinking about and developing a cohesive display of art and culture. The bulk of their time is put into the show before it opens; once it opens, one rarely sees the curator in the exhibit gallery, unless it is during a tour. Museum visitors, likewise, spend little time in the exhibition space; on average, a typical visitor looks at any specific object for just three seconds. But there are people who spend hours at a time in the exhibit space, bodies that are there every day for months. These are the museum guards, men and women, often people of color, who are unacknowledged and underutilized. As poignantly exemplified by artist Fred Wilson in his photographs "Guarded Views," the body of the guard is often ignored and dehumanized, not only by museum professionals, but also by visitors. But guards, especially if they identify with a cultural group of specific relevance to a particular exhibit, may be valuable educators as well as protectors.

## Display, Representation, Interpretation, and Education

What are directions that museums should take in the future, while utilizing new general paradigms of art and culture? First of all, when possible, museum exhibitions should display objects using indigenous systems of organization. Instead of taking art from an unfamiliar culture and fitting it into familiar modes of understanding—for example, reinforcing contrasts between "craft" and "art"—we should understand how makers and users conceptualize the art, its meaning, its beauty, its functions. Precedents for this practice do exist, exhibitions we can learn from and should replicate in some ways. Two examples of this kind of display, one a temporary show and one a permanent installation, are "Turkish Traditional Art Today" (The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe; see Glassie 1993) and "All Roads Are Good" (National Museum of the American Indian). In both cases, the visitor is forced to view and understand what is on display from the standpoint of the people who create, use, view, and make meaningful the art presented to them.

Second, curators and scholars should acknowledge that objects are engaged in *multiple moments of creation* —therefore, many of the people who come in contact with a specific object can be seen as artists. An object is made in the atelier, then it is beautifully displayed in a market stall, then it is bought and artfully displayed in home assemblage. Not only are these different contexts of use, they are actually different contexts of creation, incorporating and adhering to differing aesthetic criteria, maintaining simultaneously very individual and idiosyncratic choices, while conforming to communal standards of display and meaning.

Among other things, the study of folk art has yielded an understanding of how the personal biography of an artist should be used to appreciate the object properly (see, for example, Burrison 1983; Glassie 1993 and 1999; Jones 1989; Rinzler and Sayers 1980; Vlach 1992; Zug 1986). Many scholars have followed the model set by these studies in capturing the life history of an artist. Other scholars, such as Christopher Steiner (1994), seem to have been inspired by Arjun Appadurai (1986) to look at the life history of the art itself. We need to combine these two methodologies and understand the complete process of artistic creation by looking at the biographies of artists and the many lives of the art they have created. This approach would provide both scholars and the general public with a broad comprehensive view of how and why objects are made and conceptualized. This broad context of art would also shed light on how much of initial perception is inherent in the object, physically inscribed and therefore carried by the body of the art, and how much of it is ascribed by each individual in each interaction and context of use and in subsequent contexts of creation.

Museum exhibitions should present not only the object in context, but in multiple contexts. The same object should be shown in different contexts to explain that an object takes meaning in relation to a person or a situation *and* in relation to other objects. Museums then can combine different perspectives to create a holistic view of native systems of organizing, understanding, making, using, and constantly recreating art in ritual and mundane situations. The exhibition medium, with its capacity to create three-dimensional spaces and environments, incorporate media, and provide a multisensory experience of art and culture, lends itself naturally to this cause.

## Conclusion

Historically, too much attention has been devoted to the problem of defining who the "folk" are and what "folk art" is, instead of looking critically at what "art" is to the people who create the objects we display in museums, and investigating diverse native concepts of exhibition. Museum professionals and scholars take ethnographic objects and place them in a conventionalized framework of what a museum is, how it should look, who it serves, and how it functions. But what are the cultural insider's views of art, aesthetics, and display, and how do we understand these things in order to replicate them in our museum exhibitions? I believe this goal can be achieved by expanding the notion of "museum."

We need to encounter temples and mosques, markets and tea stalls, homes, and even the body itself *as museums*—as self-conscious creations, *curated* displays of values, traditions, and aesthetics. This perspective, this expansion of the notion of museums and native ways of seeing, ordering, and displaying art, will yield respectful exhibitions. Our goal should be to present people, their art, and the way they make, use, and view their objects of art—be they secular, sacred, utilitarian, decorative, or most likely, all of the above—as simultaneously splendid and part of common life.

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